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ROBERT BURNS

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Robert Burns

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ROBERT BURNS

YOU would not have bidden me here to-night, at any rate you would not have done well to bid me here to-night, if you had thought I should try to say much that is original. Robert Burns is perhaps the best known character in history or literature. If we do not say, as Emerson did, that the pigeons on the eaves of King's Chapel know something about him, yet certainly there is no man, woman, or child, where the Scotch or the English tongue is spoken, the round world over, to whom the tones of Burns do not seem familiar as his mother's voice. When Scotsmen meet on his birthday, they meet as children meet at a Thanksgiving table, only to recall old memories, to think again old thoughts, and to utter common words. If I have no title to speak of Burns as a Scotsman to Scotsmen, I have at least the touch of that nature which, whenever men are thinking of him, makes the whole world kin.

There is no doubt that Robert Burns is the hero of Scotland. Wherever on the face of the earth there is a Scotsman,—and they are everywhere on the face of the earth,—that name will quicken his pulse as no other will, even if it be the Bruce or Wallace or Walter Scott.

Now surely it is no slight thing to be the hero of the Scotsman's heart. The Scottish is one of the great races. I do not know that it has or ever has had a superior. Wherever you find a Scotsman, whether on land or sea, whether in peace or in battle, whether in business or on the farm, in public life or in family life, on the frontier or in the crowded city, whether governing subject races

in the East or a freeman among freemen in republican liberty, whether governing empires or managing great business institutions (sometimes harder to govern than empires), thinking or acting, discoursing of metaphysics or theology or law or science, writing prose or writing poetry,—there you may hope to find a born leader of men, sitting on the foremost seat, and, whatever may be the undertaking, conducting it to success.

We Yankees do not undervalue ourselves. We lay claim also to the quality I have just described. I think that I, a born New Englander, esteem the New England character even more highly than do most New Englanders. I like to believe that these two peoples resemble each other in mental quality, as their rocky mountains and their rocky shores are like each other, and as, in general, they have had in common the same stern Calvinistic faith. I never feel more at home than when I am reading the novels of the great magician or the collections of Scotch humor by Dean Ramsay. Dominie Sampson must have been the grandfather of Parson Wilbur. Baillie Nicol Jarvie was surely born in old Concord. The Scotch Elder and the New England Deacon are twin brothers. Both are good men Godward, and if sometimes “a little twistical manward,” it is much more rarely than is commonly supposed. If either of them loves to get money, he knows how to give it away. If the Scotsmen, like their Yankee cousins, think it a shame to live poor if they can honestly help it, they have at least given one noble example of a man who thinks it a disgrace to die rich. What a great English writer says of the Scotch would answer for the New England Puritan and Revolutionary Fathers. “Every Scotsman,” says Charles Reade, “is an iceberg with a volcano underneath. Thaw the Scotch ice, and you will come to the Scotch fire.”

So Robert Burns, sprung of a great race, will always have at least two great races for his loving audience.

He was fortunate also in a fit parentage for a great manhood and a great poet. His mother knew by heart the ancient lyrics, many of them never written or printed, of the mountain and the moor. They were the cradle hymns of the child. His father was a Scotch Puritan. Upon the plain gray stone in the churchyard at Ayr the poet carved the undying lines :—

“O ye whose cheek the tear of pity stains,
Draw near with pious rev'rence, and attend :
Here lie the loving husband's dear remains,
The tender father, and the generous friend ;

“The pitying heart that felt for human woe ;
The dauntless heart that feared no human pride ;
The friend of man — to vice alone a foe ;
For ev'n his failings lean'd to virtue's side.”

This epitaph has one fault : the poet has borrowed for it one of the best lines of one of the greatest English poets. Surely no other man ever lived of whom it could be said in criticism that instead of taking a line from Goldsmith, he might have given us a better one of his own.

Now what was this man whose fame circles the earth like a parallel of latitude ; whose words are known by heart to countless millions of men, and are to be known by heart, as we believe, to countless generations ? He was the child of two peasants, native of a bleak northern clime. He was born in a clay cottage roofed with straw, which his father had built with his own hands. Just after he was born, part of the dwelling gave way in a storm, and mother and child were carried at midnight to a neighbor's house for shelter. He got a little teaching from his father at night, by the light of the solitary cottage candle, and a little at a parish school. But Carlyle tells us that poverty sunk his whole family below the level even of their cheap school system. He was born and bred in poverty in a sense in which poverty has been always unknown in New England.

Among our ancestors, the hardships of the humblest life were but like the hardships of camping out of a hunting party or an army on a difficult march, serving only to stimulate and strengthen the rugged moral nature. It was like practicing in a gymnasium. The man came out of them cheerful and brave, with a quality fitted for the loftiest employment. Campbell tells us Burns was the eldest of a family buffeting with misfortunes, toiling beyond their strength, and living without the support of animal food. At thirteen he threshed in the barn, and at fifteen was the principal laborer on the farm. Wearied with the toils of the day, he sank in the evening into dejection of spirits and dull headaches, the joint result of anxiety, low diet, and fatigue. He saw his father, broken by age and misfortunes, approaching to that period when, to use the words of the son, "he escaped a prison only by sinking into the grave."

This kind of life — "the cheerless gloom of a hermit and the toil of a galley slave" — brought him to his sixteenth year, when love made him a poet. His first love, it is said, was his fellow reaper in the same harvest field. He has given an immortality to all his humble goddesses that no royal champion ever gave to high-born beauty. His Mary still looks down from heaven on all lovers. The star that rose on the anniversary of her death has received a new splendor from his muse. No Italian sky, no Arcadian landscape, ever smiled with

"the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration, and the poet's dream," —

like that which his genius has spread over the scene where the two young lovers met to pass a single day.

Walter Scott tells us that Burns looked forward, the great part of his life, to ending his days as a licensed beggar, like Andrew Gemmels or Edie Ochiltree. Yet this man brought to the world the best message ever brought

to the world since Bethlehem, of love and hope and reverence for God and man. Humanity the round world over walks more erect for what Robert Burns said and sung. The meanest flower that grows has an added beauty and an added fragrance because of the song of Burns. The humblest task to which man can turn his hand has an added dignity because of him. The peasant loves his wife, and the mother loves her child, the son loves his father, better because of the living words in which Burns has clothed the undying affections of the human heart. He has taught us as no other man has taught us, as was never taught us outside of the Holy Scriptures, the beauty and the glory of the worship of the soul to its Creator. The whole secret of Scottish history, the whole secret of New England history, is told in "The Cotter's Saturday Night:" —

"The cheerfu' supper done, wi' serious face,
They round the ingle form a circle wide ;
The sire turns o'er, wi' patriarchal grace,
The big ha' Bible, ance his father's pride ;
His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,
His lyart haffets wearing thin an' bare ;
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,
He wales a portion with judicious care ;
And, 'Let us worship God !' he says, with solemn air.

"Then kneeling down, to heaven's Eternal King,
The saint, the father, and the husband prays ;
Hope 'springs exulting on triumphant wing,'
That thus they all shall meet in future days ;
There ever bask in uncreated rays,
No more to sigh or shed the bitter tear ;
Together hymning their Creator's praise,
In such society, yet still more dear :
While circling time moves round in an eternal sphere.

"Compared with this, how poor Religion's pride,
In all the pomp of method and of art,
When men display to congregations wide
Devotion's every grace, except the heart !

The Power, incensed, the pageant will desert,
The pompous strain, the sacerdotal stole ;
But haply, in some cottage far apart,
May hear, well pleased, the language of the soul,
And in His book of life the inmates poor enroll.

“From scenes like these old Scotia’s grandeur springs.”

From scenes like these New England’s grandeur springs.
The spirit of the Scotch Covenanter and the New England
Puritan ; the spirit that breathed in the prayer that rose
from clay cottage and from mossy hillside, which make,

“in fair Virtue’s heavenly road,
The cottage leave the palace far behind ;”

the spirit which consoled Wallace on the scaffold and en-
countered Edward at Bannockburn, — we, too, know some-
thing about it. It crossed the sea with our fathers. It
landed with them at Plymouth and Salem. It stood, that
April morning, on the green at Lexington, and at the
bridge at Concord. It drove Sir William Howe, with his
regiments and ships, out of Boston. It captured Burgoyne
at Saratoga. It sustained Washington at Valley Forge.
It triumphed with Washington at Yorktown. It abolished
slavery. It saved the Union. It triumphed again at App-
omattox. It was the spirit of God-fearing, law-abiding
Liberty, loving home, dying if need be for country. Cer-
tainly New England may claim the right to stand by Scot-
land when she honors the memory of Burns.

No race or nation will ever be great, or will long main-
tain greatness, unless it hold fast to the faith in a living
God, in a beneficent Providence, and in a personal immor-
tality. To man as to nation every gift of noblest origin is
breathed upon by this hope’s perpetual breath. I am not
here to make an argument. I only affirm a fact. Where
this faith lives are found Courage, Manhood, Power.
When this faith dies, Courage, Manhood, Power, die
with it.

No poet can be great, whatever his genius, unless he have in his native language a fit instrument. But few languages have ever been spoken among men, so far as we know, in which the genius of a poet would not have found itself hampered and fast bound, as the soul of Shakespeare would have found itself constrained and dwarfed in the body of a brute. The lyre of the minstrel must be musical in tone. There are the Greek and the Latin and the Italian and the Spanish and the English. Among these languages the Lowland Scotch is without a superior, if not without a rival, for the utterance of what Robert Burns had to say to mankind. There was never language spoken under heaven among men fitter vehicle of the tenderest pathos, of the loftiest poetic emotion, of the pitliest wit or wisdom, of the most exquisite humor, than the Lowland Scotch. David might have written his Psalms in it, and Solomon his Proverbs, and *Æsop* his fables, and Cervantes his immortal story, and Franklin his sage and homely counsel. If any man doubt what I say, let him get "The Psalms frae Hebrew intil Scottis," by P. Hately Waddell, LL. D., Minister, and read how King David might have spoken if he had been inspired to speak for Scotsmen, and not for Jews.

Before we come to what we may call the quality of the soul of Burns, let me speak of one or two gifts with which nature endowed him which were essential to his greatness as a poet. He had the gift of tunefulness. He said the things he had to say so that you hum them like a tune. It is not enough that a sentiment be noble and true, that it be witty or wise, to move the heart and stir the pulse. It must be rhythmic in expression. This explains why it is that translations are seldom worth anything. You may translate the thought into another tongue, but you cannot translate the music. Throughout all nature the soul needs this influence of rhythm, if it is to be powerfully moved. The ship above the water is doubled in rhyme

by the shadow below. The rhythm of oar-stroke with oar-stroke, the cadence of the incoming tide, the reflection of star-lit sky in star-lit lake, — this secret of rhythm, what it is, why it so penetrates and subdues the soul, nobody knows. Substitute for one word in a line of "Lycidas" or in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" another that means precisely the same thing to the intellect, and the poetry is all gone. The genius of Scotland sings through the soul of Burns like the wind through an *Æolian* harp. His thoughts seem to come to us on the wings of melodies prepared for them from the foundation of the world.

Burns had the gift of humor. A famous English wit said it would take a surgical instrument to get a joke into the head of a Scotchman; to which a famous Frenchman well answered, "True, an English joke." Certainly Sydney Smith must have been joking himself when he denied the sense of humor to the nation that produced Burns, Walter Scott, John Brown, John Wilson, and Dean Ramsay. I myself know many delightful, wise, and witty Englishmen. I know well the contribution which the English race, to which I belong, has made to humor, from Chaucer, the morning star of poetry, through Shakespeare down to Sydney Smith himself. But for all that, these stars dwell apart. I am afraid the rays of their humor do not shine for their countrymen in general. If there be one man rather than another who cannot take a joke, and into whose serious and solemn conception of things not the slightest humor ever enters, it is the ordinary Englishman.

There is a book in two volumes by a Mr. Adams, entitled "Wrecked Lives." He includes Robert Burns in his list. We all know the sorrow and the sin and the remorse with which the life of this peasant boy — and he was always a boy — was so full. But for all that, I think most of us would have liked to be on that wreck. Do not be too sure, my sanctimonious friend, that the life of



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Geo F. Haven

Robert Burns was a sad one. God gave him of his choicest blessings. He gave him humor, that most delightful solace and comfort ever given to man, as a great humorist has said, "to enliven the days of his pilgrimage, and to charm his pained footsteps over the burning marl." With it He gave him, what He always gives with it, a tender and pitying heart, where dwelt together like twin springs the fountain of laughter and the fountain of tears. Burns had a humor that could make fun of Satan himself, and a kindly humanity that could pity him. God gave him the love of common things, the love of flowers and of birds, the love of home, the love of father and mother and woman and child, the love of country, and, above all, a country worth his love. God gave him the company of his own thoughts. Did the poems that have brought such good cheer to all humanity bring no cheer to their author? Do you think that when those immortal children were born there was no lofty joy of fatherhood? If ever poet knew the heart of poet, Wordsworth knew the heart of Burns. It was no figure of sorrow or despair that appeared to that sure and divine vision, but the figure of one

"in glory and in joy
Following his plow upon the mountain side."

If to man of woman born was ever given, not one, but a thousand glorious hours of crowded life, each worth an age without a name, they were given to him. "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled" was composed by Burns on horseback, in the night, in a terrible storm, when he was drenched to the skin. With what days of toil, with what nights of sleeplessness, with what hunger and thirst, with what scorn of men and women, with what nakedness and rags, would you or I buy the immortal ecstasy of that ride in the storm when "Scots wha hae" burst upon his intellectual vision! The peasant was in good company that night when the Bruce rode behind the horseman. With

what travail and toil would we buy the privilege for a week or a day or an hour to think the thoughts of Burns ! Do you think that there was no rapture, that there was no sweet consolation and comfort, when the light of the star that shone over Mary's grave burst upon him in the silence of his prayers, as the planets break out upon the twilight ?

I suppose this plowman of ours had many a carouse which left its unhappy trace upon brain and body. But on that night of more than royal fun when the hours —

“ As bees flee hame wi' lades o' treasure ” —

flew by Tam O'Shanter, Burns was with him. There was no headache or heartache in the cup. When glorious Tam, through the window of Alloway's auld haunted kirk, saw the young witch, clad in little more than nature had given her, take her first lesson in that immortal dancing-school, and called out, “ Weel done, cutty sark ! ” Robin was peeping, too. Perhaps it is all vain imagination, but I cannot help thinking that, on that occasion at least, the carnal mind comprehended the things that be of the spirit.

He was a noble lover, and he was a noble hater ; and, like that of all noble haters, his hatred was born always of love. He loved God. He loved Scotland. He loved Scotsmen and Scotswomen, who made Scotland. He loved flowers and hills. He loved justice and he loved liberty. He loved humanity. He hated, and only hated, the things that were enemies of these. He hated self-righteousness. He hated arrogance. He hated pride of wealth and of rank. He hated cruelty. He hated tyranny. Self-righteousness, bigotry, cruelty, tyranny, the pride of rank and the pride of wealth, were the besetting sins not only of Scotland, but of mankind at large, in his day. They are not the besetting sins of Scotland or of mankind at large to-day ; and that they are not is due to few men on this planet in larger degree than to Burns. He

brought from heaven to man the message of the dignity of humanity, of brotherly love and justice and pity for sorrow and for sin. And while we lament as Burns lamented what was sorrowful and what was sinful in his own life, yet the very fact that his life had in it so much of poverty and of sorrow and of sin fitted him all the more to deliver that message to mankind, gave a new power to the lash with which he scourged pride and self-righteousness and bigotry and tyranny, and disposed men to hearken and to give heed to that message which perhaps no other man could have so perfectly delivered. He spoke to poor men in the right of a man who was poor. He spoke to sinners in the right of a man who had sinned. He spoke to freemen in the right of a man who was free. From every line of Burns seems to come the old lesson, — What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.

Not even the love of country for a moment quenched in the heart of Burns the still holier emotion, — the love of Liberty. He was filled with the spirit of another great Scotsman, Fletcher of Saltoun, who said: “I would die to serve Scotland; but I would not do a base act to save her.” He would never stand by even his own country in a wrong. He knew that the purest love of country is that which values her honor above her glory or her life. That most abominable and pernicious sentiment, “Our Country, right or wrong,” found no home in his bosom. When the administration of Great Britain plunged his country into a war against what he thought the just rights of another people, he gave as a toast: “May our success in the present war be equal to the justice of our cause.” When somebody proposed the health of Pitt, — I think then the Prime Minister, — he gave this: “Here is to the health of a better man, — George Washington.” Just after our Revolution he wrote an ode for General Washington’s birthday, of which the first stanza is: —

“ No Spartan tube, no Attic shell,
 No lyre Æolian I awake.
‘Tis Liberty’s bold note I swell :
 Thy harp, Columbia, let me take !
See gathering thousands, while I sing,
A broken chain, exulting, bring,
 And dash it in a tyrant’s face,
And dare him to his very beard,
 And tell him he no more is fear’d,
 No more the despot of Columbia’s race !
A tyrant’s proudest insults brav’d,
They shout a People freed ! They hail an Empire sav’d !”

What has he not done for Scotland ? I suppose that romantic story which Walter Scott tells so admirably in the “Tales of a Grandfather,” — a book which should be in the hands of every ingenuous boy, — the story of Wallace and the Bruce and Randolph and the good Lord James of Douglas, of Bannockburn, of Montrose, of Argyle, of Claverhouse, of Fifteen, and of Forty-five, the genius of Campbell, of Allan Ramsay, and Dr. John Brown, would have made their way into the knowledge and, even without Burns or Scott, the heart of mankind. Yet, but for Burns and one other we should have known Scotland but as we know Wales or Denmark or Norway. I should be disloyal to the greatest single benefactor of my boyhood if I did not claim for Walter Scott a share in this achievement.

Ay me ! Ay me ! It is lang syne. It is threescore years and ten ago, almost, since I used to kneel with a book by a chair — I was not big enough for a table — to drink in with mouth and eyes wide open those wondrous stories in the “Tales of a Grandfather” — they did not let little boys read novels in those days — of Stirling Brig and the gallant exploits of Wallace, and his treacherous betrayal when Menteith turned the loaf, and his dauntless bearing at the trial, and his tragic death ; of Randolph and the good Lord James of Douglas, who loved better to

hear the lark sing than the mouse squeak ; of the Bruce and his landing on the shore of Carrick ; and the story of the spider that failed to swing himself to the beam six times, and got there the seventh, which led King Robert in his cabin to remember that he had been beaten six times, too, and might succeed the seventh, as the spider did ; and the taking of Edinburgh Castle by scaling the precipice ; and the getting Douglas Castle back three times from the English ; and Bannockburn, where the Scottish army knelt in prayer, and King Edward thought they were asking forgiveness ; and the striking down of the English knight, Sir Henry De Bohun, on the evening before the battle ; and the death of Douglas in Spain, and his pilgrimage with the Bruce's heart, when the Spanish warriors wondered that so brave a warrior had no scar on his face, and he told them he thanked God that he had always enabled his hands to keep his face ; and the casting of the Bruce's heart in its silver case into the Moorish ranks, — “ Pass thou first, thou dauntless heart, as thou wert wont of yore, and Douglas will follow thee or die ; ” and the finding the bones of Bruce, five hundred years after, in a marble tomb in the church at Dunfermline ; and the great concourse of people — “ and as the church would not hold the numbers, they were allowed to pass through it one after another, that each one, the poorest as well as the richest, might see all that remained of the great King Robert who restored the Scottish monarchy. Many people shed tears ; for there was the wasted skull, which once was the head that thought so wisely and boldly for his country's deliverance ; and there was the dry bone which had once been the sturdy arm that killed Sir Henry De Bohun, between the two armies, at a single blow, on the evening before the battle of Bannockburn ; ” and then, afterward, the story of the six Jameses, and of the beautiful Mary, and the fatal flight into England, and the scaffold at Fotheringay. Then, later still,

though yet a boy, I read the stories of Bothwell Brig, and of Claverhouse, — I was perfectly impartial between Cavalier and Covenanter, — and of John, Duke of Argyle, who, when Queen Caroline told him she would make a hunting-ground of Scotland, answered, “ In that case, Madam, I must go down and get my hounds ready ! ” and of the death of Montrose on the scaffold, who “ climbed the lofty ladder as ‘t were the path to heaven.”

These two immortal spirits, Scott and Burns, made this obscure country, smaller than an average American State, another Greece, and made of its capital another Athens, revealed to the world its romantic history, taught men the quality of its people, and associated their own names with every hill, and rock, and river, and glen. They dwell forever in a mighty companionship, the eternal and presiding genii of the place.

“ Their spirits wrap the dusky mountain ;
Their memories sparkle o’er the fountain ;
The meanest rill, the mightiest river,
Rolls mingling with their names forever.”

The message Burns brought to mankind was something more than a message of liberty or democracy, or the equality of man in political rights. These doctrines were rife already. Locke and Algernon Sidney and the men of the great Rebellion and the English Revolution had preached them. Our Fathers of the Revolution had given to the world their incomparable state papers. Samuel Adams and Jefferson had surrounded these doctrines with an impregnable fortress when Burns was an unknown plowboy. The theoretical doctrines of liberty were held by the great Whig Houses in England and Scotland. Russell and Sidney and Hampden had died for them. They were preached by men who would have regarded the contact of a peasant’s garment with their own as contamination. Our own Revolutionary leaders had a high sense of personal dignity. The differences of rank, though not based

on birth, were perfectly understood and rigorously enforced among them. But Burns revealed to mankind the dignity of humility. His heart went out to the poor peasant because of his poverty. He never doffed his bonnet in reverence to any man because of his accidents. He never seems to have had a taste for grandeur, whether physical or social. He was born and dwelt for a great part of his life in Ayr, on the seashore. His daily walk was in sight of that magnificent ocean view, fit to be compared, according to those who know them both, to the Bay of Naples itself. And yet he has not, so far as I now remember, left a line which indicates that he was moved by the grandeur and glory of the sea. The great sublimities which Homer and Milton and Shakespeare picture and interpret to us were not for him.

The sublime objects of art or nature, "the cloud-capt towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples," the everlasting sea, the mountain summits, the splendor of courts, the pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war, did not stir him to poetical utterance. The field-mouse whose nest his furrow had laid bare, the daisy his plow had torn up by the roots, the cottage, the country ale-house, the humble thistle spreading wide among the bearded bear, the peasant and the peasant girl, the toddling weans by the mother's knee, were the things dear to him. These were his inspirations. The strength of weakness, the wealth of poverty, the glory of humility, are what he came into the world to teach mankind.

I cannot explain it. I do not know that I can describe it. I cannot reason about it. But I think you know what I mean when I say that we do not think of Burns as belonging to literature, but only as belonging to nature. I do not care about finding him in books of specimens of poetry, or in collections of poets, or on the rows of book-shelves. He belongs somehow to simple nature. I should rather almost be tempted to put his picture and include

him in Bewick or Audubon, among the song-birds. You might almost expect a mocking-bird, or a vesper sparrow, or a bobolink, or a hermit thrush to sing his music. Since he was born into the world you can hardly think of the world, certainly the world for the Scotsman, existing without him. You expect for him an eternity like that of nature herself. While the morning and the evening rejoice, while the brook murmurs, while the grass grows and water runs, while the lark sings and the bobolink carols, and the daisy blossoms and the rose is fragrant, while the lily holds up its ivory chalice in the July morning, while the cardinal flower hangs out its red banner in August, while the heather blooms in Scotland or the barberry bush adorns the pasture in New England, so long the songs of Burns shall forever dwell in the soul, "nestling," as Lowell says, "nestling in the ear because of their music, and in the heart because of their meaning."

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